

# WhatsApp for defamiliarising foundation year English learners: A collaborative action research evaluation

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**Abstract.** We defamiliarized language learning by undertaking a two cycled collaborative action research by asking how using WhatsApp supports second language learners understanding of instruction, promoting, task achievement, enjoyment and creativity of learning English in class and online in Blackboard. We gathered data using a survey which indicated the advantages, challenges and learning opportunities of using WhatsApp in the first cycle. In the second cycle, the focus group, data from Blackboard and observations indicate using WhatsApp was '*enjoyable*' and '*refreshing*'. The collaborative action research prompted our conclusion of a positive evaluation for using WhatsApp to encourage learning across the university for providing language learning instructions either in class or online in Blackboard.

**Keywords:** second language learning, m-learning, mobile instant messaging, collaborative action research, transformational learning

## 1 Introduction

We begin our research with the challenges that teachers face when using students' mobile phone social media for educational purposes. The lack of experience teachers indicates a trial and error to harness mobile learning (m-learning) [1]–[3].

Second language teachers (SLT) using m-learning in traditional settings to second language learners (SLLs) have a monumental task of understanding how technology achieves meaningful learning [4]. We find the challenge narrows towards using m-learning to inform practice by practitioners evaluating their roles as SLT. Teaching on traditional settings brings pressures for learners of English who need to build their abilities for learning within a new learning environment that SLT incorporate through m-learning.

A new context is created within the environment where SLT and SLLs become inexperienced, and instruction turns the familiar upside down through the need to communicate [5]. In our language teaching context of foundation year program at a university in the Middle East, we piece the m-learning puzzle in our classroom environment [6]. As language teachers with experience of teaching English, we to

discover how SLLs will enjoy our incorporation of m-learning through a social media platform called WhatsApp [7, p. 7]. Our education includes the educational values that support our experiences to relax the process around providing our student's instruction on WhatsApp to support formal learning to take place online captured at the University's learning management system, Blackboard.

Our collaborative action research (CAR) evaluated how WhatsApp supports SLLs understanding of instruction, promoting SLLs task achievement, enjoyment and creativity of learning English.

### **1.1 Research questions**

We asked the following questions to guide our choice of research approach and the review of the literature to support the data and analysis:

- What are enjoyment and creativity within the use of technology for learning?
- How are enjoyment and creativity defined and linked to communication?
- Why are the enjoyment and creativity necessary for creating and sustaining the learning?
- How do we improve our teaching when using WhatsApp for supporting learners of English language?

## **2 Methodology**

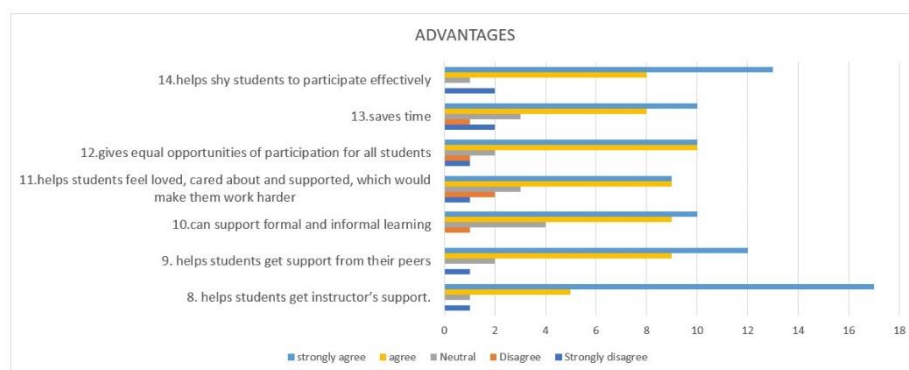
Our collaboration began with the decision for using CAR method for planning how to incorporate the use of WhatsApp in our teaching practices in two cycles of CAR. The female and male sections of the foundation year programs have separate buildings. The learners joining the foundation year courses select their respective programs and continue studying in English. The first researcher used WhatsApp for teaching the female section and used a survey to find out the SLLs' opinions about using WhatsApp for learning English, observations of the SLLs' responses in WhatsApp and recorded the findings. The second researcher used WhatsApp for learning English online in Blackboard and recorded the views of the SLLs through a focus group an interview with the SLLs and observations of the SLLs' responses to the instruction given in WhatsApp to conduct learning activities on Blackboard and the findings recorded.

## **3 Findings**

### **3.1 Cycle one: The female group**

The female group were administered a questionnaire [7]–[9] to find out the perception of the learners towards the use of WhatsApp as a supplementary tool to improve their English language proficiency. Amongst the 24 learners at the language institute, we asked and received a 100% response rate questions on the following the advantages, challenges and learning opportunities using WhatsApp:

1. 14 item question on advantages for using WhatsApp N: 14 M: 4.23 SD: 0.24. The 14 item questionnaire responses of SLLs' sample responses see (Fig. 1) below shows the positive response for learning using WhatsApp.



**Fig. 1.** The SLLs views of advantages for using WhatsApp for learning English

2. The three-item question on challenges for using WhatsApp N: 3 M: 3.71 SD: 0.20.

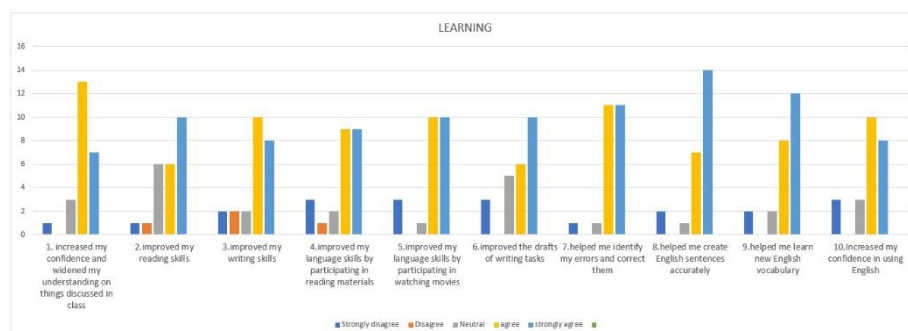
The 3 item questionnaire responses of SLLs' sample responses see (Fig. 2) below shows the positive response to the challenges represented from using WhatsApp for learning English.



**Fig. 2.** The SLLs views of challenges to using WhatsApp for learning English

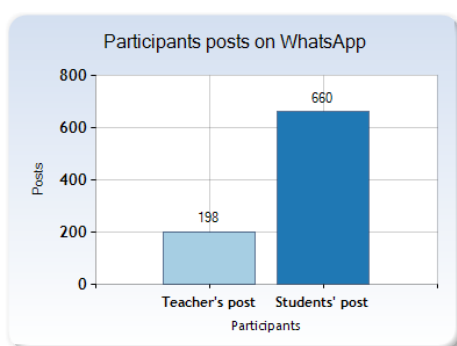
3. 13 item question on learning English through WhatsApp N: 13 M: 4.04 SD: 0.19.

The 13 item questionnaire responses of SLLs' sample responses see (Fig. 3) below shows the positive response for the learning represented from using WhatsApp for learning English.



**Fig. 3.** The SLLs views of learning using WhatsApp for learning English

We coded and cleaned the WhatsApp text for personal references and replaced the learners and their SLT as STU and AR.t. The tallied posts shows the SLT making 70% fewer posts than the learners during the period 2 September 2018 to 10 November 2018 as seen in (Fig. 4) below.



**Fig. 4.** The number of posts made in WhatsApp between the teacher and the students

Using NVivo 11, we transcribed the focus group conversation recorded at the end of the first part of the semester, 2018. We identified themes related to activities, content and setting. Finally, observing the classroom reflection of the teaching session [7], [10], [11], we identified the instruction, feedback and learners' enjoyment as reoccurring themes from the focus group.

### 3.2 Cycle two: The male group

The male group consisting of 18 SLLs were observed [7], [9], [12], using a focus group, and the SLLs' learning activities on Blackboard [7], [9], [13].

#### Focus group

We found through the focus group that using WhatsApp for learning understanding instructions for online activities on Blackboard was '*convenient*' according to the SLLs. We also found that the feedback the SLL received from the instructor was useful for learning in Blackboard because the messages for online activities were also followed like *news items* on WhatsApp. Finally, we also learnt that the SLLs enjoyed the process of learning because it was '*enjoyable*' and '*refreshing*'. However, some of the SLLs preferred messages to be sent at specific times of the day so they can get online and carry out the activities.

#### Blackboard

Activities on Blackboard included posting on a forum, doing quizzes, and participating in a discussing. The instruction on WhatsApp was links to where the forum was and what to do with a sample of the language and pieces missing such as the subject pronouns, and nouns learners can replace with their information. 5 out of 18 learners were active in asking questions on WhatsApp and the rest situated around them. After clarifying with the instructor what the expectations were all learners followed the link given in WhatsApp to make their final post on bb so they could be graded. Faced with the task to perform and the sense of responsibility 16 learners work was marked, and feedback is given. **Also due to the high participation rate in WhatsApp the use of WhatsApp contributed to learners knowing where to go and where to post for the forum activities.**

The use of the quizzes provided learners with an ability to practice the language where feedback was built in the quiz as part of the feature in Blackboard. In class, learners were given. The standard exam with their peers, however, a comparison could not be made with the peers and the learners being taught for this research. **The exams in Blackboard gave learners an opportunity to check their work from the class activity and their understanding by having the answers available once the quiz was finished.**

The critical functions for creating the discussion was for learners to work together. Groups were created, and learners watched a video the teacher created and uploaded. Students were asked to create videos about the target language where a colleague asked them questions and the video uploaded on Blackboard. The initial uploading the of the video could have been taught in class, or the lab with learners following the teacher in a teacher-led activity. However, having the video on Blackboard and learners using the discussion to clarify expectations allowed transforming videos on Blackboard.

## 4 Implications and conclusions

We evaluated how WhatsApp supports SLLs understanding of instruction, promoting SLLs task achievement, enjoyment and creativity of using English. Our evaluation was used in the context of the classroom we taught English, the instructions we provided our SLLs on WhatsApp, and the online activities carried out on Blackboard. As the first researcher incorporated a survey of the classroom and WhatsApp, a survey was used to find out the views of the learners. We reflected on the challenge of using WhatsApp in the context and hence asked questions related to measuring the advantages, challenges and learning opportunities using WhatsApp. The questionnaire represented what has been included as instruments for measuring the satisfaction of learners in the work of Awada [3].

We also used a second cycle that viewed the process of learning from the SLLs' and SLT's perspective. We considered the meaning that SLLs attached to their learning using WhatsApp, Blackboard through observing and recording their views during a focus group and their work in Blackboard. We reflected on how SLLs viewed their activities as enjoyable, refreshing which contributed to our considerations of what we had done as language teachers using WhatsApp to influence the enjoyability of the learning outcome. Our observation of our teaching sets our work along the sides of Lightbown and Spada [10] who observe the importance of interaction between SLL, the environment and the SLT. Though we could not have more SLT use WhatsApp similar to our CAR, we recognise the need for more instruction in this area because our SLLs indicate an interaction with content that highlights positive changes to learning English. When the learning reaches a level of change that can be described as permanent, our colleagues and administrators in the traditional settings can be enticed to consider how to provide access to a wider body of SLLs' learning. As we incorporated a CAR, the critical reflections characterised for sustainment using CAR for language teachers using Burns [6], [7, p. 210] can provide further support for using WhatsApp for instructing SLT/SLLs when using online learning tools like Blackboard.

We have evaluated our providing second language learners instructions on WhatsApp to support the learning of English in the classroom and on Blackboard. As inexperienced in the combination of m-learning and pedagogy, we have incorporated the use of experts in the field to validate the source of data we can generate for evaluating our research. Our data gathering technique borrowed from research method experts like [7]–[9]. Consequently, we asked our SLLs to complete ethical forms and generated informed consent for the data we gathered from the SLLs.

In *Some emerging principles for mobile-assisted language learning* Stockwell and Hubbard [1] publish their focus paper on mobile assisted language learning (MALL). The paper extensively contextualises the development and generalisations of MALL as issues relating to physical, pedagogical, psycho-social issues. To ensure our work can be sustained for language teachers to use in our practice our evaluation uses the work of Lightbown and Spada [10]. Categorising reflection within the observation of learning and teaching which provides the means to examine our teaching with WhatsApp through observing the interaction that occurs. In short, our CAR has provided a positive

evaluation for supporting SLLs through WhatsApp for understanding instruction, promoting SLLs task achievement, enjoyment and creativity when learning English.

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